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Christina Nellist, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Animal Suffering: Ancient Voices in Modern Theology*

(Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018). 430 pp. £67.99. ISBN 978-1-5275-1602-1 (hbk).

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Eastern Orthodox theology has a strong cosmic dimension that resonates deeply with ecological conceptions of the world as a single organic unity. Also, Orthodox tradition abounds with tales of saints and hermits, many of whom lived a simple life at one with animals and nature. From these facts it might be presumed that Orthodox Churches, clergy and people are likely to be ardent promoters of animal welfare. In fact, contends Christina Nellist, they are not. Herself Greek Orthodox, Nellist shows that although Orthodoxy possesses the intellectual resources that might help it take animal welfare seriously, it fails to do so in practice. Orthodox Churches, clergy and church members are directly implicated in activities that cause animal suffering, such as hunting, poisoning stray animals and bird trapping. In other instances, such as fur farming, seal hunting and experimentation, they are charged with not speaking out or acting against abuses committed by others.

Having laid her charge, Nellist moves in chapter 2 to the apparently contradictory material on animals in the Old Testament, which is expounded partly via patristic exegetes. On the positive side, this includes the vegan diet prescribed to humans, and God's creation of all living creatures as good, both in Genesis 1. Yet following the Flood, Noah sacrifices animals to God. Although his action receives divine endorsement, Nellist regards it as 'evidence of Noah's failure and sin when acting independently of God' (p. 53). Why might God condone sin? Nellist argues that Old Testament sacrifice is a divine dispensation, in which God accommodates himself to human weakness by permitting killing within strictly limited circumstances. These dispensations are neither rights nor ideals. The most obvious alternative to animal sacrifice was, Nellist convincingly contends, child sacrifice. Nevertheless, the ubiquitous sacrificial Old Testament texts read in church and at home may provide a background against which animal welfare and abuses seem equally unimportant.

Turning in chapter 3 to the New Testament, Nellist builds the case that this extends the law in both its scope of application and the level of ethical demand it makes. In the theologies of figures like Irenaeus and Maximus, Christ's coming has cosmic implications, recapitulating or reunifying fallen creation from the bottom up, as a work that is divine but also essentially human. To follow Christ therefore calls for spiritual sacrifice and ethical action that surpass the minimum. Rather than simply not hating others, humans must actively love them. Rather than limiting violence to justified enemies, humans should live peaceably with all. This extension of the law is more important than observing the letter of the law, and mandates, for instance, the alleviation of animal suffering on the sabbath.

Personal examples are important in both ethics and in Orthodox theology, and Nellist presents many saintly figures who do good to animals. These include St Makar of Optino feeding the birds on a shelf beneath his window, ensuring the jays don't consume all the seed (p. 104), and the famed St Seraphim of Sarov giving food to bears and wolves outside his forest hermitage (p. 109). At several points in the book, thinkers are identified whose work is deemed to excuse or promote animal suffering. However, some of these assessments are questionable. Aristotle's concept of teleology has been important for many years in animal welfare, especially via the work of Bernard Rollin. Augustine presents some animal species as signifying moral or spiritual truths, thereby founding the medieval bestiary tradition. Aquinas states that animals possess many of the attributes associated with reasoning, including sensory perception, imagination, non-sensate apprehension, memory and even intellect, by which he means a share of the divine likeness by virtue of being God's creatures.

Next, empirical research is reported, somewhat laboriously, in which Nellist shows that Cypriots think that the Orthodox Church is unconcerned with animal welfare but should be. In a transcribed interview she briefly discusses her findings with a local priest before heading off to Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) and then back to the Cypriot Bishop Isaías of Tamasou and Orinis. These interviews, also transcribed, form chapters 6 and 7. Issues that are raised include the relative contributions of culture and theology to shaping human behaviour, the dependence of local priests on the goodwill of their parishioners, many of whom may be farmers or stockpersons, the sometimes weak theological formation of those clergy ordained later in life, the absence of any dialogue between churches and welfare organizations and the perception that traditional practices are inevitable and cannot be changed.

Nellist narrates the incomprehension of one Cypriot priest when faced with animal welfare concern by recounting the terrible experience of a woman at her son's funeral, which was reported by the island's press. The woman was president of a dog shelter, and she and her son had worked tirelessly for it. As the woman arrived at the church with her son's body, an argument was taking place involving the priest, who was shouting that he would not permit a collection table outside the church doors for donations to the dog shelter. The table was removed.

This is Nellist's Ph.D. thesis produced at the University of Winchester and covers a wide range of animal welfare topics. It could have been shorter, and some busy readers might need to skim some material, and could have been aided by an index. Given their national contexts it is unclear what Orthodox theologians or Christians may have to contribute to some of the problems identified, such as bullfighting in Spain or trophy hunting in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe (pp. 16–17). The Orthodox voice is likely to be more effective when addressing issues in those Eastern European countries where Orthodoxy is strong. It is also unclear what outcomes Nellist ultimately wishes for. Some of the practices identified, such as restricting bears within tiny cages to extract their bile for use in traditional medicinal treatments, clearly cause unacceptable suffering and would be outlawed in any civilized country. However, in other parts of the book the argument moves in a direction that potentially calls into question any organized human use of animals for consumption or other purposes, including ordinary animal farming.

At different points in her discussion, Nellist presents at least three linked causes for animal suffering, each of which may be viewed as an outworking of sin and evil in the world. One is self-interest (pp. 212–14, 216–17), with humans too worried about their own flourishing to be concerned with that of animals. In so far as this is true, a constructive response may be to show that human interest is either not served, or is only minimally served, by animal suffering. Farmers gain economic benefit from maintaining healthy herds, and hunting and trapping are likely to be inefficient systems of animal production unless undertaken for environmental reasons, in which case they may be ethically justifiably if undertaken as humanely and professionally as possible. A second potential reason for animal suffering is the pursuit by farmers and food businesses of 'evil profit' (pp. 200–1). However, at the local level farming is rarely highly profitable, and across the European Union countries is supported by a payments system because the maintenance of land is a public good and citizens need food. The profit motive is stronger for food business operators, although even here, agricultural economists would recognize that profit isn't itself wrong. Rather, the ways in which profit may be made, due to poor policy, legislation and regulation, are wrong and need changing. Another cause cited for animal suffering is irrationality (pp. 214–16). In modern terms, this is grounded in cognitive bias, due to which the case made by evidence and arguments simply cannot be adequately assimilated. This may be closest to the mark, and to evil in its classic, negative, Augustinian meaning: not typically the intentional direct commission of heinous acts, but a willingness with others to allow our decisions and actions to be determined by perceived immediate needs and imperatives that only make use of the world rather than enjoy it too.

Contrasting Orthodoxy with Western theology and Churches, Nellist avers that it has a 'fifty-year deficit in serious theological debate on animal suffering as compared with the West' (pp. 6–7). Based on the fact that, in Britain, Scripture and theology motivated the founders of the Royal Society

for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals in 1824, and were prominent in the Society's self-understanding through the whole nineteenth century, I would suggest that this deficit is more like 200 years. Orthodoxy grounds its theology in the teaching of the earliest Christian councils and in patristic sources, remains highly clericalized due to leadership by a monastic episcopate, and has through the twentieth century suffered from Marxist political subjection in several countries. These factors impair its engagement with modern animal welfare science and its potential contribution to secular legislative programmes that might promote welfare.

Nellist passionately hopes that her study will put animal welfare on the agenda of the Orthodox Churches. I also hope that it circulates widely amongst Orthodox bishops, clergy, seminarians and laity, especially any engaged in public policy formation, advancing this objective.